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Author(s): Rock Brynner

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Cromwell's Shadow over the Confederation: The Dread of Cyclical History in Revolutionary America

ROCK BRYNNER*

History is neither to be considered as a formless structure, due exclusively to the achievements of individual agents, nor as possessing reality apart from and independent of them, accomplished behind their backs in spite of them, the work of some superior force, variously known as Fate, Chance, Fortune, God. . . . Individuality is the concretion of universality, and every individual action is at the same time superindividual.

—Samuel Beckett, "Dante . . . Bruno. Vico . . . Joyce," in *Our Exagmination Round His Factification For Incamination of Work in Progress*, 6-7.

IN January 1787, Gen. George Washington grappled with what was arguably the most consequential decision of his already momentous career: whether or not to forswear his retirement from public life to preside over the proposed Philadelphia Convention. That same month an admirer sent him a gift: a "piece of Antiquity" that once had belonged to Oliver Cromwell. Washington dutifully wrote a polite note of thanks, in which he refrained from observing that the comparison implied by the gift could hardly have been more odious.¹ The comparison, however, was both inevitable and ominous; inevitable, because in the 800-year history of the English-speaking world, only Cromwell and Washington had commanded military revolutions that removed the very institution of monarchy from their people; ominous, because the symbol of Cromwell, which in the 1760s and 1770s had well served the Patriots' cause, in the 1780s suggested unavoidably that independence would amount to little

*Delivered at a Special Lecture on September 21, 1994. Rock Brynner received his M.A. in philosophy from Trinity College, Dublin, in 1972, and his Ph.D. in history from Columbia University in 1993. His dissertation, "Fire Beneath Our Feet: Shays' Rebellion and Its Constitutional Impact," is currently being revised for publication.

1. Washington to John Henry, Jan. 23, 1787, John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799* (Washington, 1931-1944), 29:148.

more than an American interregnum. The vivid recollection of Cromwell's Commonwealth and its demise, in literature and folklore, truly haunted postrevolutionary Americans. History, to rephrase James Joyce, was a nightmare from which they struggled to awake.

What made the implications of the first English Revolution so foreboding to post-colonial America—already suggested by the very word “revolution”—was the Enlightenment certitude that history, far from being just “one thing after another,” represented an inexorable cycle of events driven by universal laws, analogous to the laws of natural science and governing all social behavior. Perhaps the most concise expression of this widespread belief in the cyclical nature of history came from *philosophe* Charles Pinot Duclos, whose *History of Lewis XI* was published in English in 1746. “The theatre of the world supplies only a certain number of scenes,” wrote Duclos, “which are perpetually coming over again in one constant train of succession. . . . Things past should instruct us in relation to things to come, the knowledge of history is no other than an anticipated experience.”² By the late eighteenth century, David Tappan would declare in a sermon at Brattle Street that “Experience proves that political bodies, like the animal economy, have their periods of infancy, youth, maturity, decay, and dissolution. . . . But when [states] have reached a certain point of greatness, their taste and manners begin to be infected. Their prosperity inflates and debauches their minds.”³ These were much the same accusations used to explain the postwar depression in the wake of the American Revolution.

As historian Stow Persons described it, “the new view of history which

2. Charles Pinot Duclos, *The History of Lewis XI, King of France* . . . (London, 1746), 1:xi-x. According to Bolingbroke, “The best instituted governments, like the best constituted animal bodies, carry in them the seeds of their own destruction; and though they grow and improve for a time, they will soon tend visibly to their dissolution.” Henry Saint-John Bolingbroke, *Letters on the Spirit of Patriotism: on the Idea of a Patriot King: and on the State of Parties, at the Accession of King George the First* (Indianapolis, 1965 [orig. publ. London and Philadelphia, 1749]), 40. In 1758, poet Martha Brewster wrote of “Man’s budding, blooming, ripening, withering States.” Martha Brewster, “An Essay On the four Ages of Man,” in *Poems on divers Subjects* (New London, 1758), [3]. And the year Shays’s Rebellion began, Gov. James Bowdoin of Massachusetts wrote of “the progressive state of nations and empires, from infancy to maturity, to old age, and dissolution,” asserting that one could observe, when nations attained “the summit of their greatness . . . , the principle of mortality, produced by affluence and luxury,” adding that “new kingdoms and empires [rise] upon the ruins of the old; all of them to undergo like changes, and to suffer a similar dissolution.” James Bowdoin, *A Philosophical Discourse, Addressed to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* . . . (Boston, 1786), 7.

3. David Tappan, *A Discourse, Delivered to the Religious Society in Brattle-Street, Boston . . . on April 5, 1798* (Boston, 1798), 18-19.

came into vogue among conservative thinkers in the years following [the Great Awakening] found the source of historical dynamics in the operation of the universal moral law, the effect of which upon history was an endless cyclical movement analogous to the life cycle of the individual organism. Societies and nations rise and fall in endless sequence according as they observe or disregard those universal moral laws ordained of God and graven upon men's consciences for their governance and happiness."⁴ Persons rightly emphasized that, especially among the clergy, many who championed cyclical history in the mid-eighteenth century were repudiating the millenarian impulse of the Great Awakening. Among conservative ministers such as Charles Chauncy, Alexander Garden, and John Thomson, cyclical history was partly a response, borrowed from Bolingbroke and the Enlightenment philosophers, to the enduring fever of the New Lights, who at first believed that their revival was actually the beginning of Christ's kingdom on earth.⁵ According to the conservative clergymen, declension could at best be postponed a while by an individual's virtue; or, in the political sphere, by a return to "the first good principles" of government, according to Bolingbroke.⁶

Most portentous to Americans was the fact that many of the selfsame ideologues who had inspired the War of Independence had also expressed their belief in this sort of historical inevitability, much as it had been delineated by Giambattista Vico, the grand master of cyclical history. In *La Scienza Nuova*, Vico had charted what he believed to be the implacable movement of cultures, governments, and whole civilizations, from pastoral democracy to classical oligarchy to regal tyranny, followed by a revolution that would lead back to democracy. Even John Trenchard, in one of his best-known tracts, seemed to concur with Vico. "Let us flatter our selves as much as we please," Trenchard wrote, "what happen'd yesterday

4. Stow Persons, "The Cyclical Theory of History in Eighteenth-Century America," *American Quarterly* 6(1954):152. See also Rutherford E. Delmage, "The American Idea of Progress, 1750-1800," in *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 91(1947):307-314.

5. Jonathan Edwards, for example, had once testified that the New Jerusalem had actually "begun to come down from Heaven" in 1740, although he later recanted. Jonathan Edwards, *Distinguishing Marks*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, D.D., Late President of Union College* (Andover, 1842), 2:272. By 1747, wrote Alan Heimert, "Edwards adopted and announced a 'cyclical' theory of history—one not of mere repetition, but of recurrence and periodically renewed and increased momentum." Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind* (Cambridge, Mass., 1966), 67. For more on American millenarianism, see James W. Davidson, *The Logic of Millennial Thought* (New Haven, Conn., 1977).

6. Bolingbroke, *Letters on the Spirit of Patriotism*, 40.

will come to pass again, and the same Causes will produce like Effects in all Ages."⁷

Those who sought evidence that postrevolutionary America was following the course of the Puritan Revolution were not disappointed. For if, as James Otis believed, "the same causes will produce the same effects, from generation to generation," like Newton's laws, then historical inevitability dictated that the Confederation would collapse into a military dictatorship, followed by the restoration of monarchy.⁸ By 1783, the first stages of this process seemed to be well under way. Americans could well expect, for example, that officers of the Confederation Army, like Lilburne's Levellers in Cromwell's New Model Army, would refuse to disband—as indeed they threatened to do that year at Newburgh. And if "what happen'd yesterday" came to pass again, then some malcontents could be expected to go well beyond the Levellers and, like Gerrard Winstanley and his Diggers, call for agrarian laws to achieve an egalitarian redistribution of property.⁹ Such radicalism would in turn lead inexorably back to monarchy. This might be forestalled for a time: after all, Cromwell had defeated Charles II at Worcester. And, like the Long Parliament, the Confederation might sustain itself for a time by selling off the nation's land to the highest bidder—just as the Continental Congress sold off a million acres to the Ohio Company. Nonetheless, Cromwell's Protectorate had ended in monarchy within a decade, a fact of haunting significance ten years after the Declaration of Independence. Samuel Adams, whom the Tories described as a "would-be Cromwell" in the 1770s but who ardently defended the establishment in the 1780s, made this point exactly, noting that "the Commonwealth of England lasted twelve years, and then the exiled King was restored with all the Rage & Madness of Royalty! A Caution to the Citizens of the United States."¹⁰

7. John Trenchard, "An Argument shewing . . .," in *A Collection of State Tracts, Publish'd during the Reign of King William III* (London, 1706 [orig. publ. 1697]), 2:566.

8. James Otis, *A Vindication of the British Colonies, Against the Aspersions of the Halifax Gentleman, in His Letter to a Rhode-Island Friend* (Boston, 1765), 3. Otis was apparently citing Trenchard verbatim: see preceding citation.

9. See George H. Sabine, ed., *The Works of Gerrard Winstanley: With an Appendix of Documents relating to the Digger Movement* (New York, 1965), 53; and Lewis H. Berens, *The Digger Movement in the Days of the Commonwealth: As Revealed in the Writings of Gerrard Winstanley* (London, 1961 [orig. publ. 1906]).

10. For "would-be Cromwell," see John C. Miller, *Sam Adams: Pioneer in Propaganda* (Boston, 1936), 343. Samuel Adams to Richard Henry Lee, Dec. 23, 1784, Harry A. Cushing, ed., *The Writings of Samuel Adams* (New York, 1904-1908), 4:312.

Although only the most ardent loyalists expected George III to be swiftly supplanted, the notion of an American king lurked in the shadows of the political culture. Washington was, of course, the most likely candidate. But by the mid-1780s, disillusionment with the Articles of Confederation and all their conspicuous failings was so profound that, according to Rufus King, President of Congress Nathaniel Gorham communicated with Prince Henry of Prussia to see if he would consider becoming king of America. Prince Henry sagaciously replied that the citizens of America, who had just spent eight years ridding themselves of one European monarch, could not be expected warmly to receive yet another.¹¹

While it would be misleading to exaggerate the parallels between England under the Commonwealth and America under the Articles, it is hardly surprising that a profound and appalling historical resonance echoed forward from the former to the latter—especially since Cromwell had been such an inspiration during the 1760s. From the start of the imperial crisis in America, the figure of Oliver Cromwell had been invoked, not as a military dictator, but as a paradigm of republicanism. As Richard L. Bushman observed, “the model for the American Revolution should have been the Glorious Revolution of 1688. . . . Yet Americans . . . followed instead the bloody Puritan Revolution.”¹² As early as 1761, Otis noted in his arguments against the Writs of Assistance that the use of arbitrary power “cost one king of England his head and another his throne”; in his attack on Governor Bernard in 1768, Otis praised Cromwell, voicing his approval of Charles I’s execution.¹³ And just six months before the Constitutional Convention was called, John Adams visited Worcester in England, declaring Cromwell’s battlefield “holy Ground, much holier than that on which your Churches stand.”¹⁴

Cromwell persisted as an icon in America, not only in literate political

11. Rufus King, May 10, 1824, in Charles R. King, ed., *The Life and Correspondence of Rufus King, Comprising His Letters, Private and Official, His Public Documents and Speeches* (New York, 1894-1900), 6:643.

12. Richard L. Bushman, *King and People in Provincial Massachusetts* (Chapel Hill, 1985), 5.

13. John J. Waters, Jr., *The Otis Family in Provincial and Revolutionary Massachusetts* (Chapel Hill, 1968), 123; John L. Sibley and Clifford K. Shipton et al., *Biographical Sketches of Graduates of Harvard University* (Cambridge and Boston, 1873-), 11:274.

14. John Adams, [“Notes on a Tour of English County Seats, &c., with Thomas Jefferson, 4-10? April 1786”], in L. H. Butterfield et al., eds., *Diary And Autobiography of John Adams* (Cambridge, Mass., 1961), 3:185.

discourse, but also in the traditions of plebeian culture transmitted from England. As historian Alfred F. Young has demonstrated, the enduring figure of Cromwell in prerevolutionary Massachusetts showed the ambivalence that colonial culture had sustained toward the trauma of regicide. As late as Cotton Mather's time, the Puritans admired Cromwell; but then, with the Radical Whigs' growing suspicion of standing armies, some influential figures of eighteenth-century society came to revile the Protector, while others, like Otis, bore Cromwell a sneaking admiration. Throughout New England, wrote Young, "Cromwell survived in a folk tradition devoid of the negative features. . . . People referred to him as Oliver . . . and . . . named their children after him."¹⁵ Cromwell, Connecticut, testifies to the belief that Cromwell had meant to settle near Saybrook; after the Stamp Act, some New Light churches in that state, mocking the loyal Anglicans, read together out loud the prayer: "We beseech thee, O Cromwell . . . deliver us." By the 1770s, the pseudonym of "Joyce, Jun.," a reference to one of the executioners of Charles I, appeared frequently in the Boston press.¹⁶ And in the most widely read prewar tract, Tom Paine equated George III with Charles I: "the principle itself leads you to approve of every thing which ever happened . . . to kings as being his work, Oliver Cromwell thanks you."¹⁷

But it was not only Cromwell's shadow that compelled America in the 1780s to hark back to England in the 1650s. All the issues of the Critical Era had erupted during the first English Revolution, including popular sovereignty, parliamentary authority, and representative franchise. After the Boston Massacre, wrote John Adams, "Cato's Letters . . . and all the writings of Trenchard and Gordon, Mrs. Macaulay's *History*, Burgh's *Political Disquisitions*, Clarendon's *History of the Civil War*, and all the writings relative to the revolutions in England became

15. Alfred F. Young, "English Plebeian Culture and Eighteenth-Century American Radicalism," in *The Origins of Anglo-American Radicalism*, Margaret Jacob and James Jacob, eds. (London 1984), 185-212; quotations on 195, 197.

16. Jacob and Jacob, eds., *Origins of Anglo-American Radicalism*, 195, 197, 198-199. For more on the memory of Cromwell, see Peter Shaw, *American Patriots and the Rituals of Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), 178, 189-195. At the same time, British and Loyalists alike meant to insult the colonists by describing them as "the descendants of Oliver Cromwell's army, who truly inherit the spirit which was the occasion of so much bloodshed." Letter from a surgeon of one of His Majesty's ships at Boston, May 26, 1775, in Henry Steele Commager and Richard B. Morris, eds., *The Spirit of Seventy-Six: The Story of the American Revolution as told by Participants* (New York, 1958), 152-153.

17. Tom Paine, *Common Sense* (New York, 1976 [orig. publ. Philadelphia, 1776]), 126.

fashionable reading.”¹⁸ Thanks partly to the constant efforts of Thomas Hollis to supply the complete Whig canon, the libraries of Massachusetts were filled with the arguments of the Commonwealthmen.¹⁹

Then, with the end of the Revolutionary War, there was no more doubt: a new age had begun, an era that repudiated the key symbols of almost every known government for a thousand years. With the exception of the English Commonwealth era, every European history and almost every folktale contained the same archetypes of royalty and aristocracy. But now the world Americans had made for themselves was something new, bereft of king, queen, prince, prime minister, parliament, archbishop, duke, baron, and earl. The very words had been swept from their daily vocabulary (though it is interesting to speculate on how those figures may have persisted in their dreams and nightmares). The fact is, this new world that they were making up as they went along was not only original, it was also unfamiliar. Events could no longer be perceived in customary contexts, and so traditional covenants of trust in authority did not hold.

In the absence of other familiar landmarks in society, what remained were the ideologies that had crystallized before and during the war. But while new political priorities in the east called for the maintenance of an authoritative government, the political landscape in the backcountry had changed less since the anti-authoritarianism of the 1770s. Whereas a standing army and an hereditary aristocracy were anathema throughout Massachusetts, only in the west was adequate representation still a concern under the Constitution of 1780.²⁰ It was there that events, when purposefully exaggerated and distorted, provided evidence that radical democracy might in fact lead to civil war, as it had under Cromwell. Exaggerated reports of the events which came to be known as Shays's Rebellion confirmed the country's most dire expectations—expectations de-

18. John Adams to Jedediah Morse, Jan. 5, 1816, in Charles Francis Adams, ed., *The Works of John Adams*, (Boston, 1856), 10:202. Caroline Robbins, “The Strenuous Whig, Thomas Hollis of Lincoln's Inn,” *William and Mary Quarterley*, 3rd ser. 7(1950):406-453; see also H. Trevor Colbourn, *The Lamp of Experience: Whig History and the Intellectual Origins of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, 1965), 202-232. To Americans, wrote Pocock, the republican ideology expressed in that literature “came to have an importance far greater than it ever possessed in Britain where it originated.” J.G.A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History* (Cambridge, 1985), 77.

19. Robbins, “Strenuous Whig,” 406-453; see also Colbourn, *Lamp of Experience*, 200-232.

20. As Pocock put it, “New democrat is but old Whig writ large.” Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History*, 88. Perhaps because the town meeting was more central to western politics, a democratic disposition was quicker to emerge there, out of Whig tradition.

rived from the same republican ideology that informed the Revolutionary War. It was these expectations, more than the number of men assembled or shots fired, that had made Shays's Rebellion seem so momentous. Those who aimed to reconstruct the Confederation and establish a Constitution succeeded in using these generally peaceful protests to cast a giant shadow, by holding them up close to the still fiery embers of Oliver Cromwell's Interregnum.

It is important to keep in mind that the American nationalists—as the early Federalists are called—were purposefully and deliberately forcing and extending comparisons between the collapse of parliamentary supremacy under Cromwell and the situation in America—especially in Massachusetts—in the mid-1780s. In the weeks before the Regulation began, letters to the *Independent Chronicle* warned that anarchy would open the door for the “enterprises of a modern Cromwell” and perhaps establish “a dreadful despotism of public freedom.”²¹

No one pushed this comparison more avidly than Gen. Henry Knox, the Confederation's secretary of war, who succeeded in alarming the General Court, Congress, and finally even General Washington with his forced interpretation of the Massachusetts Regulation—which Knox himself named “Shays's Rebellion.” By raising the most dreaded specter of the Cromwellian era—a redivision of private property—Knox echoed Gerrard Winstanley who, as Christopher Hill put it, “advocated a communist programme.” This program, rooted in Winstanley's anti-authoritarian interpretation of Christ's teachings—specifically, the Sermon on the Mount—harked back to the communistic humanism of Thomas More, as other English historians have shown, and forward to the dialectic of Karl Marx, who devoted much of his time in London to studying Winstanley's tracts. In one particularly salient example of his equalitarian convictions, Winstanley wrote to Cromwell demanding that “whatever is recovered by a joynt consent of the Commoners . . . is all equity. . . . *The spoyl shall be divided between them who went to war, and them who stayd at home.*”²²

21. [Boston] *Independent Chronicle*, June 1, Aug. 31, 1786.

22. Christopher Hill, *The Century of Revolution, 1603-1714* (New York and London, 1980), 111; see also Christopher Hill, *Puritanism and Revolution: Studies in Interpretation of the English Revolution of the 17th Century* (New York, 1986), esp. 154-193, 267-302; and Richard Ollard, *This War Without An Enemy: A History of the English Civil Wars* (London, 1976), 204. According to George H. Sabine, Winstanley's “communism was an effort to envisage a different kind of social system. . . . His argu-

Knox, the former Boston bookseller, was certainly familiar with and repelled by Winstanley's tenets. Having inspected the Springfield Arsenal soon after the first major episode of the Regulation, Knox wrote a critical letter to Washington on October 28, describing the ideology of the demonstrators in terms that vastly exceeded the goals they actually stated; indeed, he seemed to take a page directly from Winstanley. "Their creed," Knox wrote of the Regulators, "is 'That the property of the United States has been protected from confiscation of Britain by the joint exertions of all, and therefore ought to be the common property of all and he that attempts opposition to this creed is an enemy to equity and justice, and ought to be swept from off the face of the earth. . . .' In a word, they are determined to annihilate all debts, public and private and have agrarian Laws which are easily effected by the means of unfunded paper money, which shall be a tender in all cases whatever."²³ Knox went on to declare that "a body of 12 or 15000 desperate and unprincipled men" was prepared to take up arms against government with the support of 20 percent of New England and redistribute all the property of America equally. With a force nearly the size of Cromwell's New Model Army, the bankrupt Confederation did not have a chance.

And how did Washington—America's presumptive Cromwell—react to what might recklessly be called the country's first Red Scare? With profound gloom, of course, but not an iota of surprise: his correspondence in the months preceding Shays's Rebellion, like that of other nationalists throughout the thirteen states, already evinced a palpable sense of impending doom. For five years, Washington—along with the rest of the world—had observed the inadequacies of the Articles played out across the Confederation's shifting capital cities. Many dreaded an in-

ment is that the common land is commonly owned." Sabine, ed., *Winstanley*, 53. For a thorough study of Winstanley's ideology compared to that of the Levellers, as well as its relation back to Thomas More's humanistic communism and forward to the dialectic of Marx and Engels, see T. Wilson Hayes, *Winstanley the Digger: A Literary Analysis of Radical Ideas in the English Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), esp. 2, 124, 189-190, 199. Gerrard Winstanley, *The Law of Freedom in a Platform: Or, True Magistracy Restored* (London, 1651), 4 [Winstanley's italics]. See also Gerrard Winstanley et al., *The True Levellers Standard Advanced: Or The State of Community opened, and Presented to the Sons of Men* (London, 1649).

23. Knox to Washington, Oct. 28, 1786, Washington Papers (microfilm). Knox's letterbook draft of this letter in the Knox Papers is dated Oct. 23.

evitable crisis, and some even welcomed it as a therapeutic event: soon enough, though, both schools found what they anticipated in the overblown accounts of Shays's Rebellion.²⁴

Just weeks before the first court-closing in Massachusetts, Washington observed to John Jay that "our events are drawing rapidly to a crisis. . . . The better kind of people . . . will have their minds prepared for any revolution whatever. . . . Even respectable characters speak of a monarchical form of government without horror. From thinking proceeds speaking, thence to acting is often but a single step."²⁵

On September 8, 1786, just before a handful of delegates gathered for the aborted convention in Annapolis, and after the first three court-closings had been reported in the press, Richard Henry Lee wrote to

24. A chronological sampling of the gloomy correspondence includes the following: "I fully expect we shall fall into general Confusion, and perhaps undergo another Revolution." Stephen Higginson to [John Adams], Apr. 1784, in J. Franklin Jameson, ed., "The Letters of Stephen Higginson," *American Historical Association Annual Report 1896* (Washington, 1897), 1:716; "it is unfortunate for us, that evils which might have been averted, must be first felt." Washington to the President of Congress, June 22, 1785, Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 28:174; "nothing short of severe sufferings and sad experience will teach them the necessity [of revisions]." Higginson to Adams, Aug. 8, 1785, Jameson, "Letters of Higginson," 1:724; "Perhaps nothing less than the apprehension of a common danger." Higginson to Adams, Dec. 30, 1785, Jameson, "Letters of Higginson," 1:732; "Whether the people are yet ripe for such a measure, or whether the system proposed . . . is only to be expected from calamity and commotion, is difficult to ascertain." John Jay to Washington, Mar. 16, 1786, Henry P. Johnston, ed., *The Correspondence and Public Papers of John Jay* (New York, 1890-1893), 3:186; "I have little hope of amendment without another convulsion." Washington to Henry Lee, Apr. 5, 1786, Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 28:402; "my fear is that the people are not yet sufficiently misled to retract from error." Washington to the Secretary for Foreign Affairs, May 18, 1786, Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 28:431; "a Convulsion of some kind seems to be desirable." Pettit to Jeremiah Wadsworth, May 27, 1786, Edmund C. Burnett, ed., *Letters of Members of the Continental Congress* (Gloucester, Mass., 1963 [orig. publ. Washington, D.C., 1921-1936]), 8:371; "I am uneasy and apprehensive; more so than during the war." Jay to Washington, June 27, 1786, Johnston, *Correspondence of John Jay*, 3:204; "An uneasiness prevails throughout the country, and may produce eventually the desired reformations, and it may also produce untoward events." Jay to Thomas Jefferson, July 14, 1786, Johnston, *Correspondence of John Jay*, 3:206; "whether our Government may not get unhinged, and a revolution take place, before the Cure be effected. . . . We appear to be converging fast to a crisis. A change of Ideas and measures must soon happen, either from conviction or from necessity." Higginson to Adams, July 1786, Jameson "Letters of Higginson," 1:740; "nothing but a good Providence can extricate us from our present difficulties & prevent some terrible convulsion." David Humphreys to Washington, Nov. 1, 1786, Frank L. Humphreys, *Life and Times of David Humphreys: Soldier, Statesman, Poet* (New York, 1917), 1:374; "this commotion will terminate in additional strength to government." Adams to Jefferson, Nov. 30, 1786, quoted in Dumas Malone, *Jefferson and His Time* (Boston, 1948-1981), 2:157; "Order usually succeeds confusion; but it is a high price to pay." Jay to Jacob Reed, Dec. 12, 1786, Johnston, *Correspondence of John Jay*, 3:222; "The moment must be seized by Congress &c.—We must make the most of it whilst the fire burns, it will not be durable perhaps." Higginson to Henry Knox, Jan. 20, 1787, Jameson, "Letters of Higginson," 1:744.

25. Washington to Jay, Aug 1, 1786, Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 28:503.

Washington that "The period seems to be fast approaching when the people of these U. States must determine to establish a permanent capable government or submit to the horrors of anarchy and licentiousness." He included in his letter Governor Bowdoin's proclamation of September 2, imploring the citizenry to "not devolve upon their children . . . a state of anarchy, confusion and slavery."²⁶

Washington read a variety of news reports about Shays's Rebellion, primarily in the *Pennsylvania Packet*, but his most trusted informants remained Knox and Lee, both then with Congress in New York.²⁷ By mid-October, Lee fretted to Washington that "we are all in dire apprehension that a beginning of anarchy with all its calamitys has approached, and have no means to stop the dreadful work."²⁸

Conscious that his advice to Lee would be passed along to Congress, Washington replied cautiously to Lee's letters, as well as to Knox's. Still, he revealed his frame of mind just before receiving Knox's inflammatory letter of October 28, regretting that it seemed "mankind when left to themselves are unfit for their own Government. I am mortified beyond expression when I view the clouds that have spread over the brightest morn that ever dawned upon any Country. In a word, I am lost in amazement. . . . You talk, my good Sir, of employing influence to appease the present tumults in Massachusetts. . . . Influence is no Government. Let us have one by which our lives, liberties and properties will be secured; or let us know the worst at once." He urged swift action, citing Newtonian mechanics: "like snow-balls, such bodies increase by every movement, unless there is something in the way to obstruct and crumble them."²⁹

But by then the last façades of national government were peeling away, and delegates were fleeing the bankrupt Congress. "It has become a subject of admiration how Government existed," Rufus King reported to the Massachusetts legislature. "So melancholly was the state of the federal treasury that all men seemed to turn away from it, as an evil which admit-

26. Lee to Washington, Sept. 8, 1786, Burnett, *Letters of the Continental Congress*, 8:463; Massachusetts Archives 190, 226. The proclamation was reprinted in the *New York Daily Advertiser* for the week ending Sept. 9.

27. See James Thomas Flexner, *George Washington* (Boston, 1965-1969), 3:98.

28. Lee to Washington, Oct. 17, 1786, Burnett, *Letters of the Continental Congress*, 8:486.

29. Washington to Lee, Oct. 31, 1786, Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 29:33-34.

ted of no remedy."³⁰ It was the exaggerated reports of the Regulators' motives that brought moderate particularists like King into the nationalist movement.

As further exaggerations of the crisis in Massachusetts arrived, Washington noted with near disbelief the chimerical quality of the (largely inaccurate) reports he received. "It seems to me to be like the vision of a dream. My mind does not know how to realize it, as a thing in actual existence, so strange, so wonderful does it appear to me!"³¹ Did Washington believe that Shays's Rebellion represented a genuine threat to the whole nation? Apparently he did, for even after the Regulators' final debacle at the Arsenal, he expected that "anarchy and confusion must prevail, and everything will be turned topsy turvy in [Massachusetts], where it is not probable the mischiefs will terminate" and "that the political machine will yet be much tumbled and tossed, and possibly be wrecked altogether. . . . I shall be surprized at nothing; for if three years since any person had told me that at this day, I should see such a formidable rebellion against the laws and constitutions of our own making as now appears I should have thought him a bedlamite, a fit subject for a mad house."³²

When Washington received Knox's letter of October 28, he reacted with just the alarm that Knox had hoped for. What concerned Washington most was the broad picture of rebelliousness that Knox painted of New England and, by implication, of the whole continent. For though Knox's letter was huge with hyperbole, it was at least plausible that many inland settlers from New Hampshire to South Carolina might agree with the opinion attributed by the press to Regulator Job Shattuck that "it was time to abolish all debts and begin anew."³³

Washington's immediate reaction was to transcribe key passages of Knox's letter to Madison, who had visited him a fortnight earlier. The

30. Rufus King, Address before the Massachusetts House of Representatives, Oct. 11, 1786 (as reported by *Boston Magazine*), in Burnett, *Letters of the Continental Congress*, 8:480. Although there had been just a handful of peaceable demonstrations, King later observed that the Regulation "was viewed by Congress as the most important subject that ever came before that respectable assembly." Rufus King to Elbridge Gerry, Jan. 7, 1787, Burnett, *Letters of the Continental Congress*, 8:527.

31. Washington to Knox, Dec. 26, 1786, Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 29:122. The same day he wrote to Humphreys: "The thing is so unaccountable, that I hardly know how to realize it, or to persuade myself that I am not under the illusion of a dream." Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 29:126.

32. Washington to Knox, Feb. 3, 1787, Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 29:151, 153.

33. *Independent Ledger*, Sept. 15, 1786. Washington wrote Knox on Dec. 26 that the whole country was a tinder box. *Writings of Washington*, 29:122.

passage that Madison surely appreciated most was also Washington's clearest pronouncement on the fate of the Confederation, linking Shays's Rebellion directly to the need for constitutional revision: "Without some alteration in our political creed, the superstructure we have been seven years raising at the expense of so much blood and treasure, must fall. We are fast verging to anarchy and confusion! A letter which I have just received from Genl Knox . . . is replete with melancholy information of the temper, and designs of a considerable part of that people." After copying the passage quoted above from Knox's letter, Washington proceeded to express his anguish and, in effect, to challenge his own virtue, discovering in Shays's Rebellion proof of the need for constitutional revisions. "Will not the wise and good strive hard to avert this evil? . . . Thirteen Sovereignties pulling against each other, and all tugging at the federal head will soon bring ruin on the whole; whereas a liberal, and energetic Constitution, well guarded and closely watched, to prevent incroachments, might restore us."³⁴ Biographer Robert Allen Rutland has written that Madison "knew from this emotional letter that Washington was obligated to serve in the convention" and that "That signal was all Madison needed to push ahead with his plan for a national convention to follow on the heels of the aborted meeting at Annapolis. Working behind the scenes, Madison saw to it that a bill was passed by the Virginia legislature and sent to all the states, urging them to converge on Philadelphia in May."³⁵

Madison replied to Washington three days later from Richmond: "The intelligence from Genl. Knox is gloomy indeed, but is less so than the colours in which I had it thro' another channel. If the lessons which it inculcates should not work the proper impressions on the American Public, it will be a proof that our case is desperate." But Madison took heart from the gloomy intelligence. "I have some ground for leaning to the side of Hope," because, he informed Washington, in the Virginia Assembly "the Recomm[en]dation from Annapolis in favor of a general revision of the federal System was *unanimously* agreed to."³⁶

It fell to Madison, in this same letter, to challenge Washington to sacrifice his tranquility and return to public life. The same day Wash-

34. Washington to Madison, Nov. 5, 1786, Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 29:51-52.

35. William T. Hutchinson, Robert A. Rutland, William M.E. Rachal et al., eds., *The Papers of James Madison* (Chicago and Charlottesville, Va., 1962-1991), 9:162 n.2. Robert Allen Rutland, *James Madison: The Founding Father* (New York, 1987), 5.

36. Madison to Washington, Nov. 8, 1786, Hutchinson et al., *Papers of Madison*, 9:166.

ington received Knox's letter—Guy Fawkes Day—Madison had introduced his Bill Providing for [Convention] Delegates to the Virginia legislature. Now he dropped the bomb. "It has been thought advisable to give this subject a very solemn dress, and all the weight which could be derived from a single State," he wrote Washington. "This idea will also be pursued in the selection of characters to represent Virga. in the federal Convention. You will infer our earnestness on this point from the liberty which will be used of placing your name at the head of them."³⁷

It was bold indeed, if not impertinent, for the young Madison to have volunteered the general's name and then report it to him as a *fait accompli*. This compelled Washington either to forswear retirement for a venture of dubious prospects, or to damage those prospects from the outset by publicly refusing to participate—setting a poor example. Nothing in their correspondence suggests that Madison had prepared him for this choice, though Madison did have a chance to ascertain Washington's feelings when he visited the general a few weeks before, together with the young James Monroe, whom Washington had never met.³⁸ Although no record was kept of their discussions, Madison must surely have taken the opportunity to explore Washington's opinions of the most significant issues of the moment: the Massachusetts commotions and the planned Convention.

Once again, it was the specter of Oliver Cromwell that made Washington so reluctant to return to public life. His unequivocal and oft-repeated oath of retirement in 1783 was one of the wonders of the late eighteenth century. Even King George III reportedly opined that, if Washington withdrew from public life, "he will be the greatest man in the world."³⁹ As Gordon Wood has written, Washington's retirement was "extraordinary, unprecedented in modern times—a victorious general surrendering his arms and returning to his farm. Cromwell, William of Orange, Marlborough—all had sought political rewards commensurate with their military achievements. . . . Though it was

37. Madison to Washington, Nov. 8, 1786, Hutchinson et al., *Papers of Madison*, 9:166.

38. "Madison Chronology," Hutchinson et al., *Papers of Madison*, 9:xxiv.

39. Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York, 1992), 206.

widely thought that Washington could have become king or dictator, he wanted nothing of the kind. . . . and everyone recognized his sincerity. It filled them with awe."⁴⁰ If Washington reneged on his retirement and returned to the public arena, how, he fretted, would history judge him?

But the specter of Shays's Rebellion prevailed over the specter of Oliver Cromwell and overcame what Lafayette once called Washington's "reluctance to change his own opinion."⁴¹ On November 18, Washington replied to Madison and, with painful equivocation implied by a plethora of subjunctives in a single sentence, opened the door to his participation in the Convention. "Altho' I had bid adieu to the public walks of life in a public manner, and had resolved never more to tread that theatre; yet, if upon an occasion so interesting to the well-being of the Confederacy it should have been the wish of the Assembly that I should have been an associate in the business of revising the federal System; I should, from a sense of the obligation I am under for repeated proofs of confidence in me, more than from any opinion I should have entertained of my usefulness, have obeyed its call."⁴²

While this did not end Washington's fretting over the decision, it nonetheless marked the beginning of the end of his retreat, convinced as he was that anarchy would soon succumb to monarchy and that, therefore, only by sacrificing his retirement could he preserve it. To Lafayette he later wrote: "I am again brought, contrary to my public declaration, and intention, on a public theatre. . . . I could not resist the call to a convention of the States which is to determine whether we are to have a Government of respectability under which life, liberty, and property will be secured to us, or are to submit to one which may be the result of chance or the moment, springing perhaps from anarchy and Confusion, and dictated perhaps by some aspiring demagogue."⁴³

Although Washington's role during the Philadelphia Convention was more that of a figurehead than a framer, Federalists and anti-Federalists

40. Wood, *Radicalism*, 206. Trumbull quoted by Wood, *Radicalism*, 206. See also Garry Wills, *Cincinnatus: George Washington and the Enlightenment* (New York, 1984), 13.

41. Lafayette, *Memoirs . . . Published by his Family* (New York, 1837), 20.

42. Washington to Madison, Nov. 18, 1786, Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 29:7.

43. Washington to Lafayette, Philadelphia, June 6, 1787, Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 29:229-230.

alike credited his presence—along with reliable evidence of an impending civil war—with the Constitution, as well as its successful ratification. “Be assured,” Monroe insisted in a letter to Jefferson, “his influence carried this government.”⁴⁴

Ironically, with his return to leadership, first as president of the Convention then of the new nation, Washington dissipated the specter of Cromwell by refusing to embody it. By instituting a government of fundamental law, the framers obviated any apprehension of a reign of tyranny. Thus the Constitution, with all its imperfections and contradictions, forged and ratified as it was by barter, bullying, and blackmail, and consecrating the notion that “We the people” could in perpetuity exploit other people as personal property, did at least dispel the notion of an American interregnum that would inevitably succumb to an American monarchy.

Even beyond that, the success of the constitutionally established government dispelled the determinist conviction that the free will of mankind could never prevail against the riptides of cyclical history. That, indeed, was the fundamental and most vexing issue for the post-Calvinist, protestant *mentalité*. Alexander Hamilton framed this question succinctly in the first paragraph of the *Federalist Papers*, before the new government was constituted. “It seems to have been reserved to the people of this country,” he wrote, “. . . to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not, of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend, for their political constitutions, on accident and force.” The present time, he added, “may with propriety be regarded as the æra in which that decision is made.”⁴⁵

44. Monroe to Jefferson, July 12, 1788, Julian P. Boyd et al., eds., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* (Princeton, N.J., 1950-), 352. Anti-Federalist Pierce Butler later lamented that the executive office would not have been so powerful “had not many of the members cast their eyes towards General Washington as President; and shaped their Ideas of the Powers to be given to a President, by their opinions of his virtue.” Pierce Butler to Weedon Butler, May 5, 1788, in Max Farrand, ed., *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787* (New Haven, 1937), 3:302. “The *President-general*, who is to be our *king* after this government is established, is vested with powers exceeding those of the most *despotic monarch*. . . . under the proposed [Constitution], composed of an *elective king* and a standing army . . . an iota of happiness, freedom or national strength cannot exist.” “Philadelphiensis” [Benjamin Workman], Letter X, [Philadelphia] *Independent Gazetteer*, Mar. 1788, Herbert J. Storing, ed., *The Complete Anti-Federalist*, (Chicago, 1981), 3:131.

45. Alexander Hamilton et al., *The Federalist*, No. 1 (Philadelphia, 1777 [orig. publ. 1787]), 3.

With the formation and ratification of the Constitution and the inauguration of President Washington, cyclical history, and any dread of it, largely disappeared from American discourse. It was supplanted by a widespread confidence in unilinear American "progress," a secular and scientific adaptation of the millenarian conviction, which had been re-fashioned and revitalized by such disparate factors as free enterprise, access to the vast western territories, and the rise of democratic tenets as respectable political theory. In 1789 the United States became a nation, a title that even the most ardent anti-Federalists could not sensibly have bestowed upon Massachusetts, Virginia, or Rhode Island. By then, "Novus Ordo Seclorum," inscribed on the Great Seal of the United States toward the end of the Revolution, seemed less like a prayer and more, perhaps, like an empirical assertion. The writings of Jefferson, Adams, and Franklin, among many others, reflected a growing, shared conviction that the collective human experience was tending irreversibly toward a "vast amelioration in the condition of mankind," as Adams wrote in one of his last letters.⁴⁶

For all its shortcomings, the Constitution succeeded in forging together, upon the anvil of necessity, the two predominant and conflicting political principles of the late eighteenth century: popular sovereignty and contractual capitalism, as derived from the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith, respectively. The former arose from the conviction that all power rightly derived from those who were governed, and the latter from the conviction best expressed by John Jay, that the country should be governed by the men who owned it.⁴⁷ These two republican strands of thought, which had emerged from the Enlightenment fully spun, together provided the fabric of American fundamental law and darned the gaping hole that remained after the colonies tore themselves free from regal authority. The synthesis of these two ideologies into a single canon, however it could be achieved, was intended by Madison to adapt the cyclical mechanism of history—

46. Adams to Jefferson, Sept. 4, 1821, Paul Wiltach, ed., *Correspondence of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson* (Indianapolis, 1925), 176. Several examples of this conviction and its antecedents are in Persons, "The Cyclical Theory of History," 158-163, and Rutherford E. Delmage, "The American Idea of Progress," 307-314.

47. "It being a favourite maxim with Mr. Jay," according to his son, "that those who own the country ought to govern it." William Jay, *The Life of John Jay* (New York, 1833), 1:70.

the mainspring of human society—into a dynamic contest of interests that could, like a gyroscope, stand still on its own, by virtue of its motion. Thereby the natural law of inevitable recurrence, which guaranteed that “what happen’d yesterday will come to pass again,” might be co-opted into the political order and all its transactions, and thus be transformed from a constant peril into a dynamic instrument for governance.